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ABSTRACT

The dilemma of accountability and "back to basics" that has brought harsh criticism on the two-year college teacher stems from conflict between two different philosophies of education. A conservative view, based on behavioral psychology, stresses the vocational aspects of education where people are trained in skills so that they can be self-supporting members of society. The liberal view, originating in humanistic educational psychology, presents the teacher's role as developmental, in that the teacher is responsible for the cognitive, personal, and social growth of each individual. In addition, the teacher's dilemma becomes more complex because of the basic changes that have occurred in the social role of education; through integration, students of various dialects have been added to the traditional white upper middle class group who attended college in the past. If English teachers wish to stop the criticism that exists today, they must adopt the methodology employed by the community college, rather than set goals according to the egalitarian guidelines stated in the college catalog. This methodology is based on computer theory and is concerned with the breakdown of communication into sequential bits. It involves using programed texts and supplementary materials, and organizing classes as skills labs where each student drills himself or herself under supervision. (MAI)

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"I AM NOT A CROOK;"

or,

What Would You Do if You Didn't Have English Teachers to Kick Around Any More?

When I was first invited to this meeting, the conference theme-- "Hurry Up Please It's Time"-- intrigued me, but I really didn't know quite what I should talk about. I knew that Jerome Atkinson, from the Office of Consumer Affairs, would be discussing federal consumer protection in higher education and its implication for English teachers. I didn't know that there would be quite so much talk of law suits and tort insurance. Anyway, I thought about students as consumers and about their rights, and decided that this concern is just another way of re-roasting that old chestnut called "accountability." These days, accountability is usually linked to "Back-to-Basics," so I thought a lot about that movement. I read the handouts from the NCTE group called SLATE, checked the statistics on declining SAT scores, and watched some television to see if it would rot my mind. In the end, I think the statistics may have done more damage than the TV. Finally, I worked up about thirty minutes worth of the usual stuff about what the basics really are and haven't we really been teaching them all along-- the standard line of defense against the Philistines out there who want us to drill students in grammar til participles run out of their ears and they can diagram sentences in their sleep.

Unfortunately, all this puttering around with these problems got me thinking, and I had to admit that things were a bit more complex than just a case of us against them. So I scrapped what I had been preparing and started all over.

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To begin with, it's a mixed up business. The back-to-basics hue and cry is not being led just by a bunch of them, but by a bunch of us as well. There are a lot of English teachers buying that popular bestseller, A Return to Harbrace; or, Rafferty's Revenge. As a matter of fact, the Harbrace Handbook sold 429,000 copies this past year--the best annual sales in its thirty-seven year history--and English teachers placed those orders. (Off hand, I don't know how Max is doing these days.) Our students are pretty divided too. A lot come into class--perhaps more Puritan than Philistine--pleading,"Flog me with grammar; it hurts so it must be good." No, we can't split this problem into two obvious camps: teachers and students against parents and politicians. The battle lines exist at a much deeper level, and are much less clear.

Perhaps a better way to get at the heart of the matter is to pose a simple question: what does "accountability" mean? In the end, that word is a euphemism for asking whether, as teachers, and specifically as writing teachers in community colleges, whether we are earning our salaries or stealing them: Are we or are we not crooks? Which leads, of course to the title of these comments. As far back as I can remember having any interest in politics, Richard Nixon was either a senator, Vice President, a presidential candidate, or, finally President. During roughly a quarter of a century, I listened to a lot of Nixonian rhetoric, most of which was an example of what we are so often expected to teach--the sterile, mechanical use of language, not to explore, discover and communicate, but to organize for the sake of sounding logical, to impress by puffery and buzz words and to blur issues by the cheap use of devices such as transfer (the bust of Lincoln artfully displayed behind the President's shoulder during one more obfuscating and chicanerous speech about Watergate). But being inclined towards Kenneth Burks rhetoric of identification, I found myself responding one day to the human reality behind that bitten off snarl at the AFL-CIO

convention. Nixon obviously did not believe, no matter what anyone said, that he was a crook. Despite everything, he perceived himself as a man doing the best he could in a difficult job. I think something like that sense of believing we are doing our honest best lies in the heart of every community college English teacher, even while we argue furiously among ourselves about the directions our efforts should take. The fact that many of us are racked with guilt and self-doubt, that we go skipping from session to session at conferences like this one looking for a better way, that we agonize over coffee with colleagues, develop an ironic sense of humor about our work, pounce on books such as Mina Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations -- all this and so much more indicates that at bottom we want to do the right thing. But even Nixon had help in making it through his dark night of the soul-- he had Rabbi Korff, the YAF and Archie Bunker with him all the way to the end and beyond. Whom do we have? The press screams at us for creating an illiteracy crisis, our colleagues in other departments blame us because their students can't write, our students resent even the minimal time they are required to spend in our classes, and the government implies that we are a bunch of crooks. How did we wind up in this fix -- where no one supports us, and even "us" is factionalized, often bitterly so? We seem to be the only ones, each in his or her own heart, who believes that we are doing the best possible job under difficult circumstances, and even we are often suspicious of each other.

To better understand our dilemma, I think we need to examine those difficult circumstances in some detail. If we are to face the question of whether or not we are crooks--the question of accountability-- we need to examine to whom we are accountable, and for what we are accountable; or, to offend the purist, who we are accountable to and what we are accountable for.

On the surface, we are held accountable for giving our students the skills necessary to survive in the world of work. "Vocationalism" has arrived in higher education, and we are being held responsible for doing our part. A recent flyer for a technical writing book, by two community college English teachers, proudly begins with a boldface, boxed quote from Newsweek (and we all know how staunchly Newsweek supports the best interest of our profession): "To keep pace with the obvious popularity of career-oriented education, even four-year colleges and universities are making vocationalism the order of the day." One of the reasons Mr. Nixon was on my mind in preparing these remarks, incidentally, is that the "popularity" of vocationalism is a direct result of the commitment to vocationalism and the shift of resources in support of vocationalism begun under the Nixon administration. Just as in economic change, educational policy decisions at the highest level take a while to come to fruition. What we are living with in community colleges is largely the result of a specific decision made by a conservative administration to de-emphasize traditional liberal arts education and to focus higher education on training in narrow skills. And, as the Newsweek item makes clear, that decision is now beginning to affect four year colleges as well. I won't speculate on the motives behind that decision, but simply point out that this commitment to vocationalism is now part of our dilemma as teachers. Everyone is down on us because we are not giving our students the skills they need "on the job." Ironically, however, vocationalism is partially responsible for the lack of motivation among students that is necessary for them to work at developing these skills. The ad campaign for vocationalism has convinced students that all higher education should be technical training-- that anything not clearly related to their future job is a waste of time.

Needless to say, for many of our students composition courses head the list of irrelevant and immaterial time-wasters.

Let's go on, though, to look a little beyond this surface accountability that says we are responsible to our students for giving them certain skills. We have, in fact, accountability to more than just our students and accountability for more than just skill-training. Education is the vortex, the intermediate institution between the family and society. As community college writing teachers we have certain obligations, then, to society as a whole.

While we may have some control over what we teach in our classrooms, unlike doctors and lawyers, however, we do not have the option of choosing our clients. Nor do we have any influence over the role of education in society, and these facts also make up part of our dilemma. We all know how the school has increased in importance as a social institution because the family, church, the neighborhood and other institutions have weakened greatly in recent years. Among other things, for example, Federal intervention over the last twenty years has placed the burden of racially integrating society on the schools. Certainly this reality has changed the situation for English teachers. Part of the charge leveled at us is that we are not doing the job we used to do, that somehow we have abandoned our former commitment to teaching "good" English (meaning white, upper-middle class English). In fact, until the 1960's, and actually until the explosion of community colleges in the mid- and late 60's, most college English teachers simply didn't face students with dialect differences. Blacks mostly attended segregated colleges, while Indians, Hispanics, and other minorities mostly didn't go anywhere. The token few "different" students attending predominantly white institutions came in speaking the prestige dialect. But part of our dilemma is that we are now being judged for not doing "as well" in teaching dialectically different students to write Edited American English as we used to, when, in fact, we

never did it at all before. More has been done, as evidenced by the work of sociolinguists such as Labov and of teachers such as Shaughnessy, to advance our understanding of dialect difference and of how to teach students of different linguistic backgrounds to accomodate to "standard" English in the last half-dozen years than ever before, at the same time that we have been most strongly attacked. In short, the federal government brought about a basic change in the social role of education, making it responsible for integration. English teachers, always a notoriously liberal bunch, embraced the concept and set about doing what we could towards the linguistic integration of dialectically different students. At first we were attacked for being overt racists by black militants who accused us of plotting the destruction of black linguistic identity, then, after the CCCC resolution on the students' right to their own language, we were attacked for being covert racists, condemning black youth to the limits of ghettoese. Actually, the spirit behind that resolution is found in the sick feeling one gets reading Alfred Kazin's unforgettable vignette about his New York school days. As a child of immigrant parents, he was made to feel shame for the way that he and they spoke; he was ridiculed and psychologically brutalized by the teachers in school with their flawless English and boundless contempt for his struggle with the language. That kind of mistreatment-passed-off-as-education took place all too frequently in English classrooms around this country. The myth that English teachers in the past were marvelously successful in teaching hordes of immigrants to speak and write standard English is just that--a myth. The immigrants themselves learned a functional variety of English on the job and in the streets, if they were male. If they were female, they stayed home and spoke the native language, never learning English at all. The children of those immigrants learned English in school, but as much from peers as from teachers, and usually not beyond the eighth grade at best.

Remember that in the last year before World War II began, and brought with it all the fundamental and ongoing social changes that it did, that fewer than 50% of people in this country over the age of 19 had a high school education. In brief, in those good old days when college English teachers did such a good job, wasn't it actually because society set different rules for choosing our students and had different expectations for us? Prior to the era of the open door college, students had to prove they could read and write effectively before they were allowed in our classrooms. Twenty or thirty years ago our colleagues were accountable to a different set of students from those--black, brown, red and white--whom we teach in community colleges today, and accountable to a society that asked considerably less of them. College English teachers, by and large, were not asked to teach reading and writing, but simply to be guardians of the gate--to certify that those who passed through their classes could in fact demonstrate those skills, and to flunk out the few who had managed to sneak into the sacred grove without those skills already intact.

Which leads us now to ask, just what <u>is</u> expected of us as English teachers in open door community colleges today? Who are we accountable to, and for what?

We know we are accountable to our vocationally-oriented "New Students," as Patricia Cross calls them, who now don't want to learn to write thanks to the job government has done convincing them that vocationalism is all. We know we are responsible for the linguistic integration of dialectically diverse groups, although we are damned if we do it and damned if we don't. But our failure to resolve these dilemmas, over which we have no control, is not the only source of our distress. No, I think our real difficulties lie on an even deeper plane.

Today, community college English teachers are being torn between two fundamentally different anthropologies-- that is, between two profoundly different concepts about the nature of man. In traditional political terms, these are the liberal and conservative views of human nature. The liberal view, the basis of the 18th century concepts behind our democracy, holds that people are good and perfectable, that they need freedom and encouragement to fulfill their nature. In psychology, this view is found in the work of Freud and the humanist psychologists such as Abraham Maslow. The conservative view, the basis of 17th century Calvinism, is that humanity is flawed, damaged by Original Sin so that people need to be controlled to prevent the blossoming of evil in them. In brief, not that people should be allowed to develop according to their nature, but that they should be molded. This deterministic view is reflected in the behavioral psychology of Watson and B.F. Skinner. Translating these opposing concepts into the immediate situation in community colleges gives us two conflicting views of the teacher's role. If the liberal view, the view of humanistic educational psychology, holds sway, then the teacher's responsibility is developmental, that is, to be accountable for the cognitive, personal and social growth of each individual student from wherever he or she may start and according to whatever directions are best for that individual. The teacher's role should not be to set standards and to judge. On the other hand, if the conservative view dominates, then it becomes the teacher's responsibility to decide what should be learned, to provide information and direction, to set standards and to judge rigorously according to them. The teacher is not responsible for what happens to all those who fail. The first approach is essentially egalitarian--every student deserves an equal opportunity to develop. There should be no less attention paid to students who are ill prepared or lacking in traditional academic abilities. This model recognizes that traditional academic potential is not inherently superior to any other potential, and encourages whatever growth the student is capable

of in whatever direction possible. The second model is at best meritocratic, at worst elitist. It is meritocratic if we view it through the metaphor used by James Doherty, a colleague in an upstate New York community college, who calls it panning for gold. Community colleges, and those who teach in them, serve society by providing a process for discovering the nuggets of pure gold that might otherwise be lost. The rest, the most of what passess through our pans, is simply sluiced away. In another, even more disturbing comparison, community colleges become analogous to Tuskeegee Institute in the post-Reconstruction South and all the state supported A&M and A&I institutions in its wake. In this view, we see community colleges and federally sponsored vocationalism serving the interests of elite America in the same way that those agricultural and technical institutes served the interests of the white South. In both instances, people are <u>trained</u> so that they can be selfsupporting and contribute to the economy, but they are not <u>educated</u> so that they might challenge society to grant them their rightful place. In short, community colleges become tax-supported training grounds for industry, eliminating expensive on the job training and screening out unsuitables by refusing to certify them. This latter, elitist view is somewhat harsh, its true, but perhaps not inappropriate to consider at a conference built around an allusion to "The Wasteland."

Well, which is it? Which anthropology undergrids the community colleges of America? Which one defines our accountability as teachers? To shift allusions a little here, I wish I could be like Lazarus come from the dead to tell you all--but I can't, because the issue hasn't been resolved yet. The battle is ongoing, and much of the confusion and turmoil, the sense of being pulled to and fro that we feel as community college teachers, results from our being caught in the midst of this covert, but none the less internecine strife. Let's make an effort, however, to cut through the smoke of battle a little, perhaps to glimpse something that may suggest the outcome.

In the beginning, and to this day in much of the literature about community colleges, we see them depicted as the peoples' college--the daring, egalitarian innovation on the educational scene, in implied contrast to the meritocratic land-grant schools and elite private institutions. The purpose statement in most community college catalogs runs strongly to the egalitarian line. But is the promise holding up? If we look at the lofty goals being stated, and then closely at the means being used to attain them, we make a shattering discovery. The methodology implemented over the years derives not from the humanistic psychology of Maslow, not from the cognitive psychology of Piaget and Bruner, but from the deterministic, behavioral psychology of Skinner. The goal of the institution is stated as being the fullest development of the individual, but the methods employed in reaching this end are increasingly technological, based more in computer theory about the breakdown of communication into sequential bits, than in psycholinguistic theory about the innate, generative nature of human language. Teaching is pre-packaged into uniform learning modules built on Skinnerian reinforecement for pre-selected, standard performances by all users, and this passes under the name of "individualized instruction." We see increasing attempts to standardize course descriptions and content throughout state-wide community college systems, as has been done in Florida and Virginia for example. We see the content of English courses reduced more and more to the narrow limits of technical writing and the mastery of minimal skills. We see the publishing and testing industries heavily involved in supplying software for the hardware produced by the educational divisions of computor firms and sewing machine manufactors. And we see teachers being held accountable for the failures of these systems and materials they never sought. Finally we see computer assisted instruction, video taped classes and other technological developements on the brink of replacing teachers, or at least of making it possible to replace them with semi-skilled labor.

More and more, the attacks on teachers' honesty and willingness to work are aimed at those who refuse to accept the degredation of a professional art to the simple repetition of mechanical tasks on an educational assemble line turning out a standard product, that is, a graduate properly trained to perform on the job. The struggle between egalitarian ideal and elitist reality racks community colleges today, and, I'm afraid, that we might not "need a weatherman to see which way the wind blows."

If deterministic psychology and elitist concepts of control do win out, then our accountability will be clear. To earn our salaries we should train, test and credential. We should give up the egalitarian ideal and return to being gate keepers.

What are the alternatives? To go on with a well-meaning but foolish insistence that we have something to offer our students as humanists and teachers? To go on being recalcitrant laggards, refusing to embrace minimal-skills technology as the be-all and end-all of education? To keep on insisting that given time and support we truly would love to help our students develop basic skills, but that sometimes under today's conditions this attempt is impossible, so we settle for trying to help them develop a little as well-rounded human beings? Would there be any point in trying to tell the truth to the world at large anymore, as former community college teacher Marjorie Fallows did when she said,

> In every community college class we know that some students will find their own capabilities and will ultimately achieve the self-confidence to use them. But the miracle does not occur for all students; many discover that college is not for them. The lack of confidence and skill engendered by social and economical disability does not always signify that under the disability is a diamond in the rough. Sometimes--usually -- there is merely a human being.

> Community college teachers have learned to settle for this, and we can only hope that a society which foots the bill can be realistic about what can be accomplished; teaching the student who is marginal in his preparation, his commitment, his social and academic skills, and his self-confidence is extraordinarily hard work. (Change, March, 1975,p.53)

Would there be any point in developing Ms. Fallow's remarks futher by pointing to the research that confirms the extraordinary difficulty of teaching language skills in particular to these students? I'm thinking of Eric Lenneberg of the Harvard Medical school whose research indicates that,

> After puberty, the ability for self-organization and adjustment to the physiological demands of verbal behavior quickly declines. The brain behaves as if it had become set in its ways and primary, basic language skills not acquired by that time, except for articulation, usually remain deficient for life. (Biological Foundations of Language, NY: John Wiley, 1967, p.158)

No, once the battle is resolved, there would be little point in trying to maintain any vestige of the humanist position, to argue that while we can not in fact "remediate" everyone, that we owe as much attention to students who obviously will never achieve pre-determined standards as we do to those nuggets and diamonds thrown into our classes. We should be ready to give up completely practices such as freewriting and journal-keeping, descriptive and narrative writing that allow a student, despite an inability to spell or punctuate correctly, to have a first-hand, holistic encounter with the writing process. To persist in these practices would be foolish at best, and would likely confirm the suspicion that we are self-serving exploiters of the student consumer.

Therefore, to quote Johnathan Swift, "let no man talk to me of these and the like expedients." Rather, I shall now "humbly propose my own thoughts, which I hope will not be liable to the least objection." My own modest proposal is that we should bite the bullet and get on with the business of getting back to basics. We should order the proper programmed texts and supplementary materials; organize our classes as skills-laboratories where each student drills himself or herself under our supervision. If we do this properly, we should be able to supervise at least 150 students a term and thus become more cost-efficient as well as more effective teachers. Instead of wasting so much time preparing essay assignments, and wasting even more when we have to read the papers, we should rather make up one long list of objective grammar questions that can be fed to the computer once, and then electronically shuffled forevermore to produce endlessly varied tests. A further benefit will become apparent when the machine grades the tests and flunks students for us. Society will then be protected from our human laziness and sentimentality which, at present, sometimes cause us to let a lump of iron pyrite or a zircon slip by.

I do wonder, though--just what will all those folks in Washington and the press do when they don't have English teachers to kick around anymore?